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## Op-Ed

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## A Voice of Disapproval by John Perry Smith (Total Information, Inc.)

Approval plans corrupt the bookseller, debase the library collection, squander scarce publishing resources and trivialize scholarship. Whether they can be blamed for bad breath and ring around the collar is a question that must be left for more qualified commentators.

It is easiest for me to assert the first point: as a bookseller (over twenty-five years), I know the realities of life in the jobbing trade. Booksellers will inevitably gravitate to those publishing programs that present the highest discount, the lowest cost of shipping, the easiest returns policy and the most generous credit terms. Booksellers are business people. Our job is to make money by selling books. Of course we usually have a special place in our hearts for books (or at least we did at one time or another) which is why we aren't in the business of selling boots, bombs, buses, burgers or bustiers. But no matter how we came to this business, once in we are subject to all the constraints that any business person faces. We must make money to keep the enterprise alive. Discount, shipping, returns and credit are the four freedoms of a bookseller. Our decisions must be made with these in mind or we will find ourselves on the justly, if inelegantly, named "scrapheap of history." Monograph approval plans managed by booksellers are, at best, an insurmountable conflict of interest looking for a home (your library!).


University libraries have an obligation to cherish and nurture a physical collection of monographs. A library is known by the quality of the collection it offers. Every collection should reflect the unique characteristic of a particular institution, a definite time and the taste of the bibliographers and collection development librarians. Periodicals, data products and government output tend to a uniformity of representation depending on the size and status of the library. Monographs offer the one opportunity to forge a personality for a particular collection. It is this personality that must be nourished by the collection development department through active decision making in the front list purchasing process. This involves hours spent with publishers' catalogs, reading innumerable reviews and working with representatives from the different discipline departments to craft the best possible collection from a limited budget. Approval plans, already tainted at the source, inject a serum of banality into the major research collections of our country. They waste precious resources and misdirect others into dead end publishing fads that come back with embarrassing regularity when weeding decisions must be made. Sold cynically under the belief that humans being humans (any comment to the contrary notwithstanding, librarians are human) are lazy, and many mediocre books will be "marked and parked" rather than "scanned and scored", approval plans give the bookseller a guaranteed base of sales that locks in the lion's share of the monograph budget. Important books from small and uncooperative publishers (from the jobber's point of view) will be missed, and out of print before their absence is noticed. The current movement to ship "on approval" titles already processed only cements all the negative features more firmly in place.

From a pure perspective of self-interest, the librarian who uses a large approval plan helps to establish the notion that book selection is really just a commodity. Once this notion seeps into the consciousness of the management of the library and the university it's only a small step to simply outsourcing the whole department.

Publishers are intellectual vampires. They troll the night of authorial despair to pillage the lifework of scholars and dreamers to manufacture "product". Without distinction as to their particular organizational nature (conglomerate, scholarly, university, society, self or vanity) they must sell books. Trees must fall, ink must spill and lunches must be eaten, month after month, season after season, year after year. Who has not seen their "acquisition editors" skulking through professional meetings dropping business cards and buying drinks looking for the next "hot idea" manuscript? Gender studies, ethnic studies, deconstruction, reconstruction, string theory, cold fusion, revisionist

historicism, neo-Marxism: who cares, as long as we can ship it out and keep it from coming back. What if we could sell the first printing before the reviews had time to hit? What if we didn't mail any review copies for six months? There is nothing too trivial, nothing too shallow, too stupid, too boring, or too evil that some publisher will not publish it. And if the terms are right, it will make its way into your collection through the trap door of your approval plan. Librarians, where are the gatekeepers?

Of course by starting out so many conversations with "what are libraries buying?" publishers will seek out the faculty that will continue to produce more of the same. More monographs, more collections of essays (Oh Lord, lift this burden from me!), more reinforcement for the conventional wisdom. With enough help from the publishers, the peer-review reviewers, and the approval plans, unconventional and revolutionary voices are trivialized and driven out of the mainstream, out of the heart of the approval plan publishing establishment to languish at the fringes of disapproval. Through the invisible hand of uninformed self-interest the publishers, booksellers and faculty authors act like the benzine snake grasping its tail firmly in its mouth. Only this snake is slowly devouring itself and with it the quality of the research library collections that are the intellectual heritage of our civilization.

I realize these are fighting words to my bookselling colleagues, my publishing friends, my librarian customers and my scholarly associates. Go ahead! Put 'em up! 

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